

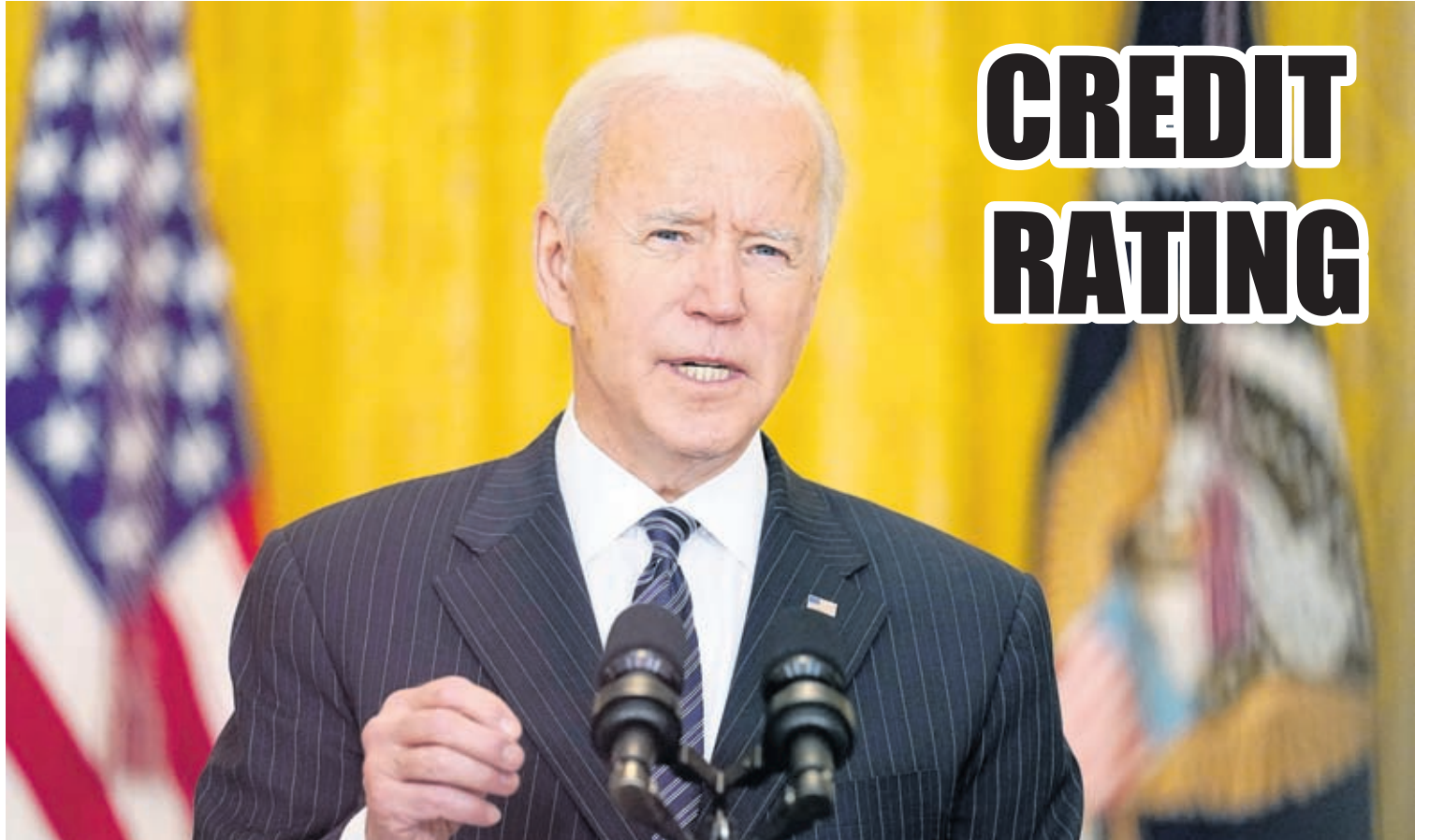
Who deserves credit? Biden leans into pandemic politics

By STEVE PEOPLES and ZEKE MILLER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In President Joe Biden's war against the coronavirus, former President Donald Trump hardly exists. The Democratic president ignored Trump in his first prime-time address to the nation, aside from a brief indirect jab. It was the same when Biden kicked off a national tour in Pennsylvania on Tuesday to promote the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan.

Continued on Page 2



CREDIT RATING

President Joe Biden speaks about COVID-19 vaccinations, from the East Room of the White House, Thursday, March 18, 2021, in Washington.

Associated Press



Sharing Menu \$50 per couple



2 appetizers



1 Main dish



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Who deserves credit? Biden leans into pandemic politics

Continued from Front

Now, as his administration is on the cusp of delivering on his promise of administering 100 million doses of vaccine in his first 100 days, Biden is in no rush to share the credit.

The truth is that both Biden and Trump deserve some credit, though Biden stands to benefit from being in power during the nation's emergence from the pandemic. In the president's telling, the United States' surging vaccination rate, economic recovery and the hope slowly spreading across the nation belong to him and his party alone.

On Thursday afternoon, Biden took an early victory lap on reaching the vaccination milestone more than a month before he promised, saying the 100 millionth dose would be administered Friday — his 59th day in office.

"One headline simply put it: 'It won't be easy.' Well it wasn't," Biden said, taking credit for putting the federal government on a "war footing" after he took office.

The president's approach represents a determination to shape how voters — and history — will remember the story of America's comeback from the worst health and economic crises in generations. In the short term, the debate will help decide whether Democrats will continue to control Congress after next year's midterm elections. And in the longer term, each president's legacy is at stake.

For now, the fight is framed by conflicting realities.

On the Democratic side, Biden and his allies see a nation still desperate for government intervention. They point to more than 9

million jobs still lost, thousands of Americans still dying of the coronavirus every week, and state and local leaders in both parties seeking help.

Enter Biden's relief package, which public polling shows has broad support. The package provides checks and tax breaks directly to Americans and will add money to the pandemic fight, as well as help state and municipal governments close budget shortfalls.

On the other side, Republicans largely believe that most Americans are doing just fine after the GOP — under Trump's leadership — put the country on a path to recovery before Democrats won the White House and both chambers of Congress in January. They note that hundreds of billions of dollars remain unspent from last year's rescue packages.

In an interview, Pennsylvania Sen. Pat Toomey stopped short of endorsing the call by his Republican Senate colleague Rick Scott of Florida for states to return billions of dollars allocated in Biden's pandemic-relief plan, which includes \$1,400 checks for most Americans. But Toomey described the Democrat-backed package, which polling suggests is overwhelmingly popular, as "an embarrassment."

Toomey also mocked Biden's attempts to take credit for the pandemic progress, saying, "I suppose roosters take credit for the sunshine sometimes."

Trump's response to the virus last year was wildly inconsistent and divisive, but it's undeniable that the former president's push for vaccine production, known as Operation Warp Speed, gave Biden something to build on as soon as



In this Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020, file photo, then-President Donald Trump speaks during an "Operation Warp Speed Vaccine Summit" on the White House complex, in Washington.

Associated Press

he took over.

In his early days in the White House, Biden's team made headlines as they said publicly that he had inherited no plan to combat the pandemic. The White House has since backed off that argument, however, because it's not technically accurate.

The Biden administration inherited two effective vaccines, with others in the pipeline. And even a much-touted program to distribute vaccines through retail pharmacies has its roots in the last administration.

Even so, since taking over, Biden has overseen a dramatic increase in vaccine distribution and played a more active role in giving states consistent pandemic-related guidance. Late last week, for example, the new president announced that all Americans would be eligible for a vaccine by May 1, a directive meant to help cut through the patchwork of conflicting eligibility requirements across the country.

Democratic National Committee Chair Jaime Har-

ison charged that Trump played down the seriousness of the coronavirus for months, leaving states on their own to address the historic health and economic crises.

"Joe Biden has come in to clean it up, to clean up the mess," Harrison told The Associated Press. "I have no room for giving Donald Trump any credit. This is a man who couldn't even say, 'You need to wear a mask.' And right now, you see the people who are resisting the most are people who voted for him, in terms of taking the vaccine."

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 42% of Republicans say they probably or definitely will not get the shot, compared with 17% of Democrats.

For all the GOP griping, Trump has not helped position himself as an effective leader in public health.

The former president largely ignored the pandemic — and the success of the vaccine development — in his final months in office, consumed instead by spread-

ing false claims of election fraud.

Trump's White House aides all but begged him to focus on selling the promising vaccines in the weeks after the November election, believing he would be able to take credit for their development and rollout. But Trump rejected an aggressive plan to promote the vaccines that his team had planned.

Trump is the only living president who did not appear in a public service announcement released last week encouraging all Americans to get the vaccine. He addressed the issue briefly during a Tuesday interview on Fox News, acknowledging that a lot of his supporters are reluctant to be vaccinated.

"I would recommend it to a lot of people that don't want to get it. And a lot of those people voted for me, frankly," Trump said. "But you know, again, we have our freedoms, and we have to live by that, and I agree with that, also. But it's a great vaccine. It's a safe vaccine. And it's something that works." □

Students who got partial loan relief to see full discharge

By CAROLE FELDMAN

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Students who were defrauded by their colleges and received only partial relief from their federal loans could now see them fully canceled, the Biden administration announced Thursday, reversing a Trump administration policy.

The change could lead to \$1 billion in loans being canceled for 72,000 borrowers, all of whom attended for-profit schools, the Education Department said. "Borrowers deserve a simplified and fair path to relief when they have been harmed by their institution's misconduct," said Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. "A close review of these claims and the associated evidence showed these borrowers have been harmed, and we will grant them a fresh start from their debt." The department said it was rescinding the formula used by the Trump administration to determine partial relief and putting in place "a streamlined path to receiving full loan discharges."

The decision applies to students who already had their claims approved and received only partial relief, the department said.

A senior department official briefing reporters said the agency was continuing to review both the backlog of claims yet to be decided



Education Secretary Miguel Cardona speaks during a press briefing at the White House, Wednesday, March 17, 2021, in Washington.

and those that have been denied. The department described Thursday's action as "a first step" and said it would be looking at rewriting the regulations down the road.

In addition to having their loans fully canceled, students will be reimbursed for any payments made on the loans and have their eligibility for federal student aid reinstated. The department said it also would ask credit bureaus to remove any negative ratings tied to the loans.

"Abandoning partial relief is a strong start for a narrow subset of borrowers, but what we need from the Ed-

ucation Department is an overhaul of the current borrower defense process," said Toby Merrill, director of the Project on Predatory Student Lending, which represents former students at for-profit colleges.

"The previous administration turned borrower defense into a total sham that was rigged to deny claims without any true consideration," Merrill said. "The Biden-Harris administration must now address these failings or else perpetuate a system that is stacked against the very students they are supposed to protect."

Career Education Colleges

and Universities, an industry lobbying group, said it had no comment on the Biden administration's actions.

The borrower defense to repayment program allows students to have their federal loans canceled if they were defrauded by their colleges. The Obama administration had expanded the program aimed at helping students who attended for-profit colleges. But President Donald Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos, pulled it back, saying it had become too easy for students to have their loans erased, and revised the program to make it harder for them to

get relief, including providing only partial cancellation of the loans.

Congress voted to overturn DeVos' changes last March, but it was vetoed by Trump. Nearly two dozen state attorneys general had sued the Trump administration over its implementation of the borrower defense to repayment program, which allows borrowers to have their loans canceled if their colleges made false claims to get them to enroll. One of the plaintiffs in that suit was California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who was confirmed Thursday as President Joe Biden's health secretary.

The lawsuit, which was filed last July, argued that DeVos had changed the policy without justification, failed to provide a meaningful process for students to get their loans forgiven and created "arbitrary impediments" for them, including forcing them to prove that their schools knowingly misled them. Sen. Patty Murray, who heads the Senate committee overseeing education, said DeVos used "faulty math" to deny student full relief. Rep. Bobby Scott, chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor, called it "a nonsensical formula."

"This announcement is life-changing for tens of thousands of people across the country," Scott said. □

Associated Press

Report shows U.S. homelessness rising even before pandemic

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Homelessness in America was on the rise even before the coronavirus pandemic dramatically dragged down the economy, according to a government report.

The Housing and Urban Development Department's annual report on homelessness provides a snapshot of the number of homeless people, both sheltered and unsheltered, in America on a single night. The one-night counts are conducted during the last 10 days of January each year, and the new report shows

that 580,466 people experienced homelessness in the United States on a single night in January 2020 — an increase of 12,751 people, or 2.2 percent, from 2019. Newly confirmed HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge said in a statement Thursday the results were "very troubling." She added: "What makes these findings even more devastating is that they are based on data from before COVID-19, and we know the pandemic has only made the homelessness crisis worse."

The report found that homelessness has increased in America for the

past four years after what it called "steady reductions" from 2010 to 2016.

"Housing should be a right, not a privilege, and ensuring that every American has a safe, stable home is a national imperative," Fudge said. "As a nation, we have a moral responsibility to end homelessness, and we know how to do it." Fudge said President Joe Biden's COVID-19 relief plan, which includes \$5 billion for emergency housing vouchers, has equipped her department with tools to help get individuals and families off the streets. A long-serving Ohio con-



Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge speaks during a press briefing at the White House, Thursday, March 18, 2021, in Washington.

Associated Press

gresswoman, Fudge said her final act as a House

member was voting to approve the aid bill. □

Storms moving eastward, leave trail of damage in Deep South

By JAY REEVES

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) —

Storms that left splintered homes and broken trees across Alabama and Mississippi moved into Georgia and Florida on Thursday, rousing residents with early morning warnings as forecasters said the threat of dangerous weather would move up the south Atlantic seaboard.

The weather service said at least two people were hurt when an apparent tornado struck southwest Alabama, destroying a house. Pieces of homes and twisted metal laid amid broken trees in the hardest-hit areas, but no one died and the region appeared to escape the kind of horrific toll many feared after ominous predictions of monster twisters and huge hail.

"Overall, we have a lot to be grateful for, as it could have been much worse," Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said in a statement.

The National Weather Service office in central Alabama said teams were fanning out Thursday to assess damage in at least 12 counties where tornadoes may have touched down. Forecasters issued a string of tornado warnings around the region where Alabama, Georgia and Florida intersect, but there were no immediate reports of major damage.

The storms were expected to intensify as they move



A chicken farm off Strengthford Cooley Road in Wayne County, Miss., sustained extensive damage on St. Patrick's Day after a tornado touched down Wednesday, March 17, 2021.

Associated Press

into South Carolina and North Carolina on Thursday afternoon.

A line of storms stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to West Virginia, and the Storm Prediction Center said other, isolated severe storms were possible from southern Ohio into the central Appalachians.

"Significant tornadoes, wind damage and large hail will be possible from morning into afternoon," the center said. "Severe thunderstorms will also be possible from parts of the eastern Gulf Coast into the southern and central Appalachians."

The metro Atlanta area was pelted by heavy rain with

intense lightning and strong wind gusts of up to 50 mph (80 kph). Morehouse College tweeted that it was delaying the opening of its campus until 11 a.m. and that faculty and staff should not arrive until after that time. All classes before then were to be held virtually, it said.

In South Carolina, the severe weather threat led the state Senate president to caution senators to stay home Thursday while urging staff to work remotely for their safety. House Speaker Jay Lucas kept his promise from the day before to meet less than an hour Thursday so members could beat the severe

storms home. The forecast led a number of the state's school systems to call off in-person classes Thursday and have students and teachers meet online.

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington canceled its evening classes as a precaution.

On Wednesday, possible tornadoes in Alabama knocked down trees, toppled power lines and damaged homes. Some of the worst problems were in rural Clarke County, where authorities said two people were hurt when a home was destroyed and several others were damaged.

Between Montgomery and Birmingham in Chilton

County, a storm destroyed at least three homes including that of resident Jimmy Baker.

"Then about a minute before it got here, we jumped ... in the hall closet, a little, small closet," Baker told WSFA-TV. "And just we heard it. You know, the sound from the house coming down. We were saved. We thank the Lord for that," he said.

In north Alabama, where forecasters said as much as 6 inches (15 centimeters) of rain fell, a woman who rescuers found clinging to a tree after her car was swamped by floodwaters in Morgan County was treated at a hospital, but details about her condition were not immediately available. Schools closed in neighboring Madison County because of flooding.

Roofs were yanked off homes in Moundville, south of Tuscaloosa. "There's a lot of trees down. I guess it had to be a tornado; it got out of here pretty fast," aid Michael Brown, whose family owns Moundville Ace Hardware and Building.

Additional damage was reported in Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi, where video showed an apparent tornado at Brookhaven. High winds blew down signs and trees in northeast Texas, and hailstones the size of baseballs were reported near the Alabama-Mississippi line, the weather service said. □



In this June 9, 2017, file photo, Grant Berardo, a student at Wall High School, flips through his 2017 school yearbook in Wall, N.J.

Associated Press

WALL TOWNSHIP, N.J. (AP) — A New Jersey school dis-

trict is paying \$325,000 to a former New Jersey teach-

New Jersey district pays \$325K in Trump yearbook censorship

er who claimed she was forced to digitally edit a Donald Trump T-shirt worn by a student in a yearbook photo.

The Wall Township school board approved the settlement agreement with Susan Parsons on Tuesday, NJ Advance Media reported.

The district made no admission of wrongdoing or liability. The money will be paid by the district's insurance carrier.

Parsons was the high school's yearbook adviser when she said a secretary acting on behalf of the principal ordered her in 2017 to remove "Trump Make America Great Again" and make it appear as if the student was wearing a plain navy blue T-shirt.

"That has to go," the suit alleged Parsons was told. Parsons, who said she voted for Trump in 2016, said she was made a scape-

goat and received death threats.

She was suspended with pay after the incident. She claimed she regularly complained about being forced to alter photos. Parsons will receive about \$204,000 and the remainder of the settlement will cover attorney fees, according to the agreement. The school district reissued the yearbook with the original unaltered photo. □

Dutch PM Rutte's conservatives see 4th straight election win

By MIKE CORDER

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) —

The process of forming a new Dutch governing coalition began Thursday, a day after Prime Minister Mark Rutte's conservative party powered to a fourth consecutive victory in a vote held during a nationwide lockdown and dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The feat put Rutte in position to lead coalition talks, most likely with another big winner — the centrist, pro-European D66 party led by former diplomat Sigrid Kaag, who danced on a table Wednesday night when an exit poll showed her party capturing one of its biggest-ever victories.

However those two parties will likely need at least two more partners to form a majority coalition. According to the national news agency ANP, based on 88% of votes counted, Rutte's party, known by its Dutch acronym VVD, won 35 of the 150 seats in the lower house of parliament while D66 garnered 24.

Rutte wants to move quickly to hammer out a coronavirus recovery plan before getting into a government blueprint for the new coalition's four-year term.

"We must have plans in place to unlock the country," Rutte told his lawmakers in a virtual meeting



Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte speaks with the media following exit polls in the general election in The Hague, Netherlands, March 17, 2021.

Thursday.

The splintered political landscape in the Netherlands — 17 parties were forecast to have won at least one seat — could make coalition talks difficult.

Party leaders took the first step Thursday by appointing two "scouts," one from Rutte's VVD and a second from D66, to examine different parties' wish lists and investigate possible coalitions ahead of formal talks. The VVD selected Senator Annemarie Jorritsma, while D66 chose Kajsa Ollongren, who was interior minister and deputy prime minister

in Rutte's last Cabinet. They plan to start talks with party leaders Monday and write a report for the newly elected lawmakers ahead of their first sitting on March 31.

"In times of corona, it is of course important to form a new Cabinet as soon as possible.. that can get to work on the economic and social social recovery," Jorritsma said, adding that she hopes it will be possible to form a new coalition before the summer.

Rutte's victory had been widely predicted even though the election came

just two months after his last coalition resigned over a scandal in which the country's tax office wrongfully labeled thousands of families who claimed child welfare benefits as fraudsters.

The other big winner of the night was the far-right populist Forum for Democracy, which rose from two to eight seats after its flamboyant leader, Thierry Baudet, campaigned on a pledge to end the country's coronavirus lockdown. As other party leaders spoke to reporters Wednesday night, Baudet was conspicuous by his absence. By

Thursday morning, the Twitter hashtag "waarisbaudet" or "whereisbaudet" was trending in the Netherlands. The party eventually expressed its gratitude to voters.

"A half million people in the Netherlands have said: we want our lives back. A thunderous blow against the endless lockdowns. A huge victory for freedom," the party tweeted.

Baudet, arriving at parliament for a meeting of party leaders, told reporters he "was actually hoping for more" seats in the election. It was something of a political resurrection for the party that imploded late last year amid reports of anti-Semitic text messages among its youth wing.

Despite the gains for Baudet, the far-right populist bloc in the Netherlands is unlikely to take part in any new coalition. Anti-Islam lawmaker Geert Wilders, whose Party for Freedom lost three seats and is now the country's third-biggest party, said he would again lead the opposition.

The political left also looks likely to be out of power after parties lost seats or failed to gain ground after four years in opposition to Rutte's outgoing center-right coalition. The Green Left party, a big winner in the 2017 election, was forecast to lose half of its 14 seats. □

Group of Seven slams Russia annexation of Crimea, 7 years on

BERLIN (AP) — The Group of Seven major industrialized countries on Thursday issued a strong condemnation of what it called Russia's ongoing "occupation" of the Crimean Peninsula, seven years after Moscow annexed it from Ukraine.

The foreign ministers of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the U.S. said in a joint statement that Russia's actions continue to "undermine Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence."

"We unequivocally denounce Russia's temporary occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevasto-

pol," the seven countries said. "Russia's attempts to legitimize it are not, and will not, be recognized."

They accused Russia of human rights abuses on the peninsula and called for international monitors to be given access there.

Moscow has argued that Crimea was incorporated in 2014 after the vast majority of local residents voted for joining Russia weeks after the ouster of Ukraine's former Russia-friendly president, even though most of the world rejected the referendum as illegitimate.

Russian President Vladimir Putin marked the anniversary by speaking to resi-

dents of Crimea via video link and also attended a concert in Moscow marking the event.

"It's a holiday for our entire vast country," he said at the Luzhniki sports arena. "It's the restoration of historic justice. Every inch of that land is drenched in the blood of Russian and Soviet soldiers, this land is sacred for Russia." The Black Sea peninsula became part of Ukraine in 1954 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred jurisdiction from Russia, a move that was a mere formality until the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Crimea landed in an independent



Enthusiasts fix a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin to a balloon during celebration of the anniversary of Crimea annexation from Ukraine in 2014, in Sevastopol, Crimea, Thursday, March 18, 2021.

Associated Press

Ukraine. The G-7 statement also cited Russia's role in the ongoing conflict be-

tween pro-Moscow separatists and the government in eastern Ukraine. □

ICC gives Israel month to seek deferral of war crimes probe

By JOSEPH KRAUSS

Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The International Criminal Court said Thursday it has sent formal notices to Israel and the Palestinian Authority about its impending investigation into possible war crimes, giving them a month to seek deferral by proving they are carrying out their own investigations. Earlier this month, the ICC announced it would investigate possible war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants following a request by the Palestinians, who joined the court in 2015 after being granted nonmember observer status in the U.N. General Assembly.

Israel has fiercely condemned the investigation, accusing the ICC of bias and saying it has no jurisdiction since the Palestinians do not have a state. Israel is not a member of the ICC, but its citizens could be subject to arrest abroad if warrants are issued.

The ICC prosecutor's office confirmed in a written statement to The Associated Press that on March 9 the letters were sent to all of the court's member states and those states that would normally exercise jurisdiction, including Israel and the Palestinian Author-



In this Saturday, Aug. 2, 2014 file photo, Palestinians stand on the rubble of houses destroyed in an Israeli strike in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip.

ity. Israeli and Palestinian officials declined to comment. The ICC is expected to focus on the 2014 Gaza war, Israel's crackdown on often-violent border protests in Gaza in recent years and Israel's settlement activities in the occupied West Bank. The probe will also look at militant rocket fire from Gaza onto civilian areas in Israel.

Israel could respond to the letter by detailing its own efforts to investigate potential crimes and hold its citizens accountable. If the

court is satisfied with the process, it could allow it to unfold under periodic ICC supervision, postponing or even cancelling its own investigation. Israel could potentially avail itself of that option for the allegations regarding Gaza violence, as it says it routinely investigates and punishes wrongdoing by its own troops.

But the construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 war that the Palestinians

want for their future state, is an official state policy going back decades. Some 700,000 Israeli settlers live in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, where Israel subsidizes housing and provides security and infrastructure.

International law forbids the transfer of civilians to territory occupied in war. Israel views Jerusalem as its unified capital and the West Bank as a special case whose future status should be decided in negotiations with the Palestinians, which

Associated Press

have been moribund for more than a decade.

Israel's Channel 13 said the Article 18 letter was received last week and that Israel has around three weeks left to respond. It said the National Security Council has discussed the matter without making a decision. Israel is holding national elections on Tuesday and it could take several weeks to form a new government.

Israel's mostly ceremonial President Reuven Rivlin and its military chief, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi, have meanwhile been rallying opposition to the ICC during a European tour this week that has taken them to Germany, Austria and France.

"Every attempt to twist Israel's hands through international bodies by cynical or political exploitation of international law is doomed to failure," Rivlin said in Paris on Thursday.

The Palestinians have expressed outrage at the idea the ICC would investigate militant rocket fire or the use of civilians as human shields by Hamas, which rules Gaza, and other militant groups. They view such actions as self-defense and are extremely unlikely to seek a deferral by launching their own investigation. □

Canada denied access to trials of jailed Canadians in China

By ROB GILLIES

Associated Press

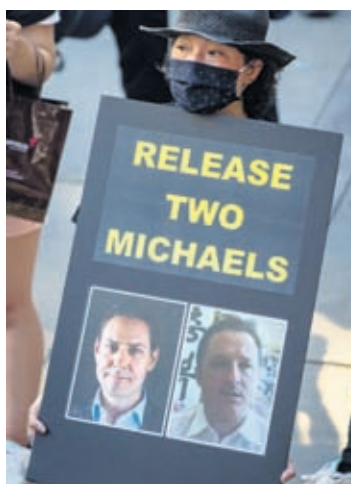
TORONTO (AP) — Canada said Thursday that its consular officials have not received permission to attend the trials of two Canadians who were arrested in China two years ago in a move widely viewed as a pressure tactic over Canada's detention of an executive at Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei. Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat, and Michael Spavor, an entrepreneur, were arrested in December 2018, days after Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou was detained in Vancouver, British Columbia. The U.S. wants her extradited to face fraud charges related

to her company's dealings with Iran. Kovrig and Spavor face spying accusations, and the Canadian Embassy in Beijing has been notified that court hearings for the two are scheduled to take place Friday and Monday. "The official notification received from Chinese authorities indicated that these trials are closed to both the public and the media. Despite several official requests to Chinese authorities, Canadian officials have not yet received permission to attend the trials," Global Affairs spokesperson Christelle Chartrand said. "We remain deeply troubled by the lack of transparency surrounding these proceedings."

China has demanded Meng's immediate and unconditional release, saying the U.S. engineered her detention as part of a drive to contain China's growing rise. Canadian authorities say Kovrig and Spavor were arbitrarily arrested to put pressure on Ottawa and say they should be released without charge.

Meng, the daughter of the founder of Huawei, remains free on bail and living in a mansion in Canada while her case winds its way through the courts. Little information has been released about the charges against Kovrig and Spavor, or their conditions in detention, although the ruling Communist Party newspa-

per Global Times this week said the pair were allegedly part of a conspiracy to steal Chinese state secrets. Meng's arrest enraged Beijing, which has also retaliated by restricting various Canadian exports, including canola oil seed, and handed death sentences to another four Canadians convicted of drug smuggling. The legal tussle is expected to be raised at a meeting later Thursday in Alaska between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and top Chinese diplomats. Blinken has pledged "absolute solidarity" with Canada in calling for Kovrig and Spavor to be freed. □



In this Aug. 16, 2020, file photo, a woman holds a sign with images of Michael Kovrig, left, and Michael Spavor, who have been detained in China since December 2018, during a rally in support of Hong Kong democracy, in Vancouver, Canada.

Associated Press

Suu Kyi payments claimed as Myanmar junta raises pressure

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP)

— A Myanmar construction magnate with links to military rulers said he personally gave more than half a million dollars in cash to deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a broadcast on state television aimed at discrediting the ousted civilian government.

The statement by Maung Waik could pave the way for more serious charges against Suu Kyi, who has been detained since the Feb. 1 military takeover while security forces increasingly use lethal force against a popular uprising demanding the restoration of democratically elected leaders. The military has already tried to implicate Suu Kyi in corruption, alleging she was given \$600,000 plus gold bars by a political ally. She and President Win Myint have been charged so far with inciting unrest, possession of walkie-talkies and violating a pandemic order limiting public gatherings. In the latest salvo of allegations, Maung Waik, who has previously been convicted of drug trafficking, told state TV he gave cash to government ministers to help his businesses. He said the money included \$100,000 given to Suu Kyi in 2018 for a charitable foundation named



People walk along a deserted road blocked with improvised barricades build by anti-coup protesters to secure a neighborhood in Yangon, Myanmar, Thursday, March 18, 2021.

Associated Press

after her mother, \$150,000 in 2019 for which he did not specify a reason, \$50,000 last February and \$250,000 in April, again with no purpose specified.

The country's Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating the allegations and vowed to take action against Suu Kyi under the Anti-Corruption Law, the state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar reported Thursday.

Meanwhile, a court has issued an arrest warrant for the country's U.N. ambas-

sador, Kyaw Moe Tun, on charges of treason, the newspaper reported.

The charge stems from his remarks Feb. 26 at U.N. headquarters, in which he condemned the coup and appealed for "the strongest possible action from the international community" to restore democracy in his country.

Also charged with treason was Mahn Win Khaing Than, the civilian leader of Myanmar's government in hiding, the newspaper said. The acting vice presi-

dent and member of Suu Kyi's political party on Saturday had vowed to continue supporting a "revolution" to eject the military from power.

On Thursday, residents of a Yangon suburb set street barricades ablaze to block riot police.

Video showed large palls of smoke rising over the Tha Mine area in the city's Hlaing township, with another barricade burning fiercely in the middle of a residential area. One resident, who did not want to be named

for fear of retaliation, told The Associated Press that protesters set them alight after hearing that a column of police trucks was on its way.

Building barricades – and occasionally burning them – are now established tactics by opponents of the junta all over the country to impede police and army movement. The barriers also provide some protection from the now-frequent use of live ammunition against them.

On Wednesday, at least two people were shot dead in Kalay in northwestern Myanmar, according to media and social media posts that included photos of the victims. More than 200 people have been killed by security forces since the coup, according to credible tallies.

On Thursday, the head of the junta attended an online meeting of military leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.

It was a rare appearance by senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing before an international gathering since the coup.

ASEAN's chairman earlier this month called for an end to violence in Myanmar and for talks to try to reach a peaceful settlement. □

Disgruntled Haiti police raid stations, free jailed comrades

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP)

— Masked officers who said they belonged to a disgruntled sector of the Haitian police force known as Fantom 509 stormed several police stations in Port-au-Prince on Wednesday, freeing jailed comrades accused of participating in an alleged coup against embattled President Jovenel Moïse last month.

The group of officers, along with some civilians, set a police station ablaze and then headed to a local Nissan auto dealership, which was looted and vandalized. Among the officers storming the station were police in uniform with their faces covered to avoid being recognized.

The day began with officers and police academy cadets marching toward police headquarters to demand that the bodies of five officers killed during a raid last week on the Village of God shantytown be recovered from the gang still holding them. The shantytown is run by the 5 Seconds gang.

The ill-fated raid, which took place five days ago, was aimed at arresting gang members but resulted in the death of the five officers and the wounding of several others.

Things heated up in Haiti's capital Wednesday when disgruntled officers took to the streets demanding the release of their arrested

colleagues. They told local media they belonged to Fantom 509.

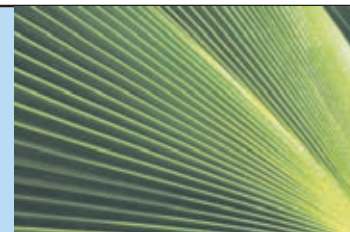
Political strife in Haiti has deepened as opposition leaders claim Moïse's five-year term has expired. They had demanded that he step down on Feb. 7. On that day, Moïse announced that authorities had arrested 23 people accused of plotting a coup to kill him and overthrow his government, including a high-ranking police official and a Supreme Court judge favored by the opposition. Hours after the arrests, the opposition nominated a supposed transitional president that no one has recognized and have organized protests. □



Armed and masked police officers move forward on a motorcycle during a protest by a disgruntled sector of the Haitian police force known as Fantom 509, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Wednesday, March 17, 2021.

Associated Press

LOCAL



A.T.A launches new campaign for Latin America: Extended Happiness

ORANJESTAD – March 20th is International 'Happiness Day' and to celebrate this day Aruba Tourism Authority introduced a new campaign specifically for the market of Latin America named 'Extended Happiness'.

The promotion of this campaign started on March 8,

2021 and will continue up till the end of the month. The programme has different benefits for couples, group of Friends or family members.

ATA partnered up with different associates such as AHATA, airlines, tour operators in order to make this campaign possible. Dis-

counts will be offered at different hotels, Airlines and much more. All these offers are available on www.aruba.com.

The Latin America market has been surprised with these great offers from 30 different hotels, special discounts at restaurants, activities and airline tickets from this region. Expectations are high for this campaign and there are already 5.00 persons who registered to receive these specials.

Latin America is a very important market for Aruba. In 2019 this continent was at 9.5% of the total visitors of Aruba. Due to the global pandemic and closing of our borders we only had 4.8% of visitors of this continent in 2020. Now for the first two months of 2021 Latin America is already at



4.8% of the total visitors.

On March 20th, 'Happiness Day' ATA will launch a video produced in Aruba. For this video they choose different Latin America visitors, couples and groups, at different hotels who received a very special surprise. They were surprised with an extended stay in Aruba and also several other gifts.

here in Aruba they were surprised once again when told that they are one of the lucky winners of the campaign and their stay will be extended with 2 more days. The gentleman had another surprise for his girlfriend and on the night of the extended stay he popped the question to his girlfriend asking her to marry. Offcourse she said Yes!

Aruba Tourism Authority would like to thank all the partners that took part of this special program that serves as an incentive for all Latin America travelers who choose Aruba as their vacation destination. □

One of the winners of the extended stay invited his girlfriend to a surprise trip and at the airport in Colombia she learned that they will be coming to Aruba. Upon their arrival





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The positive effect of actively managing feral herbivores for local flora

KRALENDIJK, BONAIRE — An update to a 40-year-old Sabal palm survey for the islands of Bonaire and Curaçao highlighted the striking differences between the two islands. Through active park management, Curaçao has seen over more than a 11 three-fold increase in adult Sabal palms, whereas an unmanaged palm population on Bonaire has seen a decrease of nearly 20% of adult palms. Actively protecting these valued endemic palms may be the only way to ensure their future.

The Sabal palm, or Kabana as it's known locally, is the only native species of palm tree found on the islands of Bonaire and Curaçao. In fact, the true identity of this palm has been heavily debated, with its classification changing throughout the years until it was finally recognized in two scientific publications as two endemic species Sabal antillensis on Curaçao, in 2017, and on Bonaire Sabal loughediana, in 2019.

On both islands the Sabal palm population is found in very limited distribution areas. On Curaçao, its range is limited to the highest hills in the southwestern part of the Christoffelpark and its direct surroundings there. On Bonaire, this palm is only found within the Lima area, the very low limestone terrace located west of Lac Bay and north of the salt pans.

In 1979, researcher J.E. Winkelman first surveyed the number of palms on both islands, which she found to be 1,062 specimens in total. Of these, only 354 were mature palms, and only 31 of these could be found on Bonaire. In this initial study, Winkelman also noted that the largest threat to these remaining palms was most likely free roaming animals, such as goats and donkeys, who could eat and trample seedlings. Since this initial assessment, no follow-up surveys have been conducted, creating a significant knowledge gap concerning the current status of these iconic palms.

Luckily, a new study worked to close this gap. Researchers documented current populations on both islands and compared these results to the initial 1979 survey. The goal was to not only provide an updated count, but also note if any change to their range have occurred, providing important insight into factors that will contribute to designing an effective conservation strategy.

The Study

In 2018, surveys were conducted by counting the number of palms on each island. Given the small geographical areas and uniqueness of the terrain, it was generally easy to find and spot these palms. By using similar techniques and survey sites, a direct comparison between the 1979 and 2018 studies could be

completed to help evaluate the local populations as decreasing, stable or increasing.

Interestingly, populations on these two islands have had very different developments over time. There has been a 318% increase of adult palms on Curaçao, whereas Bonaire has seen a decrease of approx. 20%. In addition to population changes, there was also fairly significant shifts in their range as well. On Curaçao, the overall geographic range of these palms increased, from less than 5 km² in 1979 to 8 km² in 2018. Again, Bonaire saw a very different trend, with the geographic range shrinking from 5 km² to less than 1 km².

Other results

For both islands, there were a relatively large number of seedlings seen through their geographical range. On Curaçao, this could have been the result of the increase in adults. On Bonaire, it is more likely attributed to the time of year the surveys were conducted. The 2018 survey was conducted right after the wet season, which could account for the increase in the number of seedlings due to the fact that fresh seeds germinate quite easily.

Changes in overall numbers of palms can be attributed to a wide range of factors. Christoffelpark has actively managed their

goat and donkey populations since the mid-1980s. This decrease in free roaming grazers may have given these palms a higher probability of survival. These grazers have been known to feed on and trample seedlings, along with reducing vegetation and soil cover, further threatening the ability of seedlings to successfully grow. The increase in Curaçao's range could be related with the successful dispersal of seeds by local animal populations, as there are several species of birds, deer, rodents and iguanas live in this area and are known to feed on these seeds.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have led the researchers to make four important recommendations have to design a successful conservation strategy for these palms. First they recommend actively managing wild herbivores in the palm area. On Bonaire this would be the construction of a 3.5 km fence that runs along the perimeter of the Lima area to enclose the entire Sabal palm population in the Lima area. Second, they recommend getting and establish a more comprehensive monitoring plan to monitor the health and recruitment of these palms and to provide key indicators of change in future populations. Thirdly recommended that Bonaire actively cultivate these palms in other parts of Bonaire to improve the overall popu-



The endemic Sabal antillensis that only grows on Curaçao. Photo credit: John de Freitas

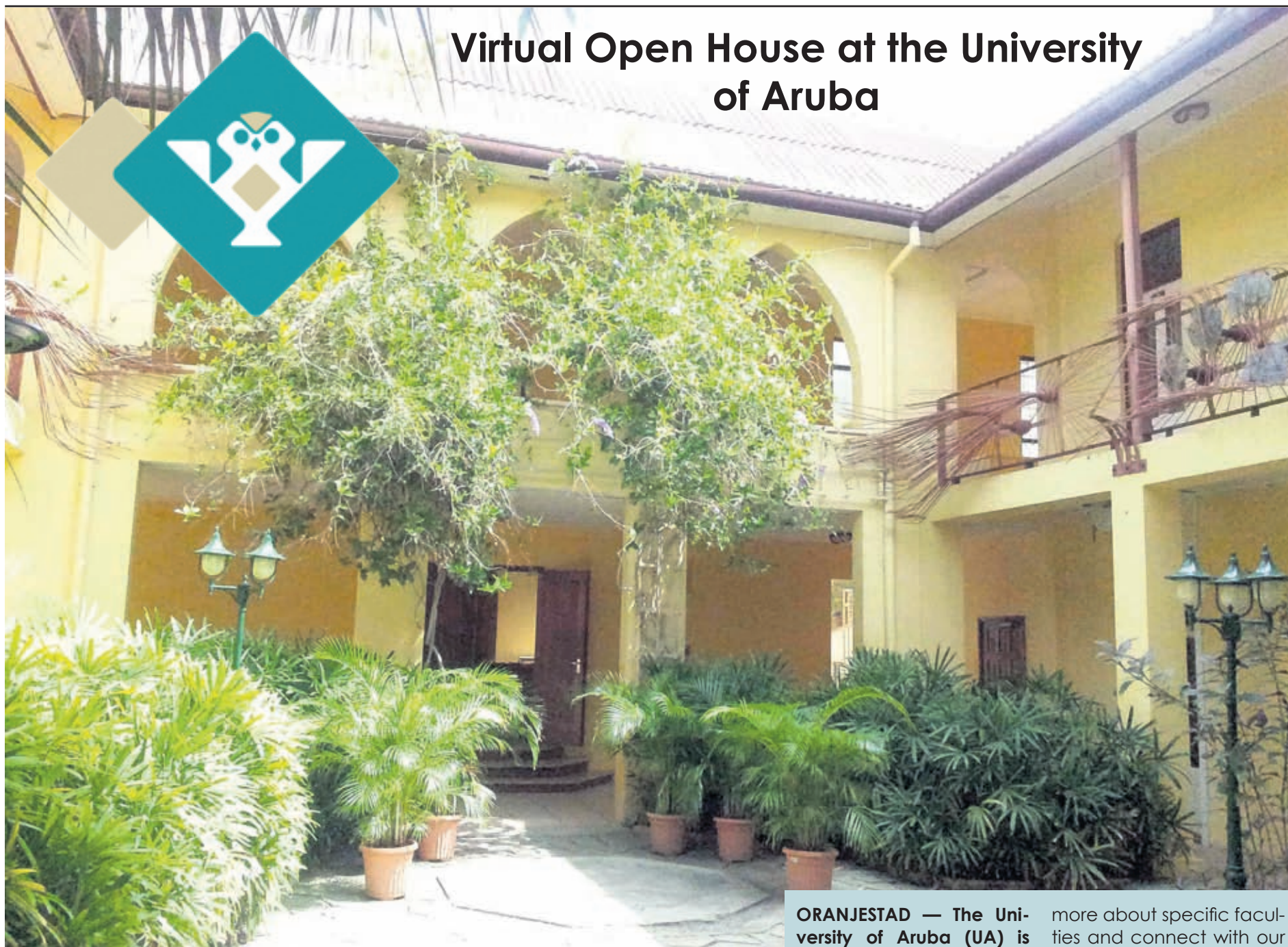
lation. Finally, the successful Christoffel Park management program must be continued, as this study shows the great impact of a decrease in the number of wild grazers.

Future of the local flora

The free-roaming grazing animals in Aruba, Curaçao Bonaire are often part of the iconic charm of the islands. However, for a successful future of the island's endemic species, for both plants and animals, a balance is needed within the ecological capacity of nature.

This study shows how actively these wild grazing animals manage the vegetation of the island can improve drastically. Understanding the impact of each species on the ecosystem helps design and implement management plans to ensure a healthy future for the island. □

Source: Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance



Virtual Open House at the University of Aruba

ORANJESTAD — The University of Aruba (UA) is delighted to invite you to our Open House for the upcoming Fall Semester. With respect to current Covid-19 protocols, we will be hosting a Virtual Open House on March 25th 2021.

UA proudly offers eight major areas of concentration as well as a comprehensive Academic Foundation Year which allows first year students to unlock their full educational potential. UA offers a diverse range of extra-curricular activities, student mentoring and in-house programs that promote overall health, wellbeing and personal growth. UA students also have exciting opportunities for studying abroad with our global Erasmus Grant partners.

Our virtual doors open at 5:30pm for general information followed by two virtual classroom sessions, from 6 - 6:45pm and 7 - 7:45pm, where you'll have the opportunity to learn

more about specific faculties and connect with our esteemed lecturers. After the Open House, you can sign-up for a F2F session or a google-meet session with the lecturers and students for a more personal and in-depth information session.

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IRS will delay tax filing due date until May 17

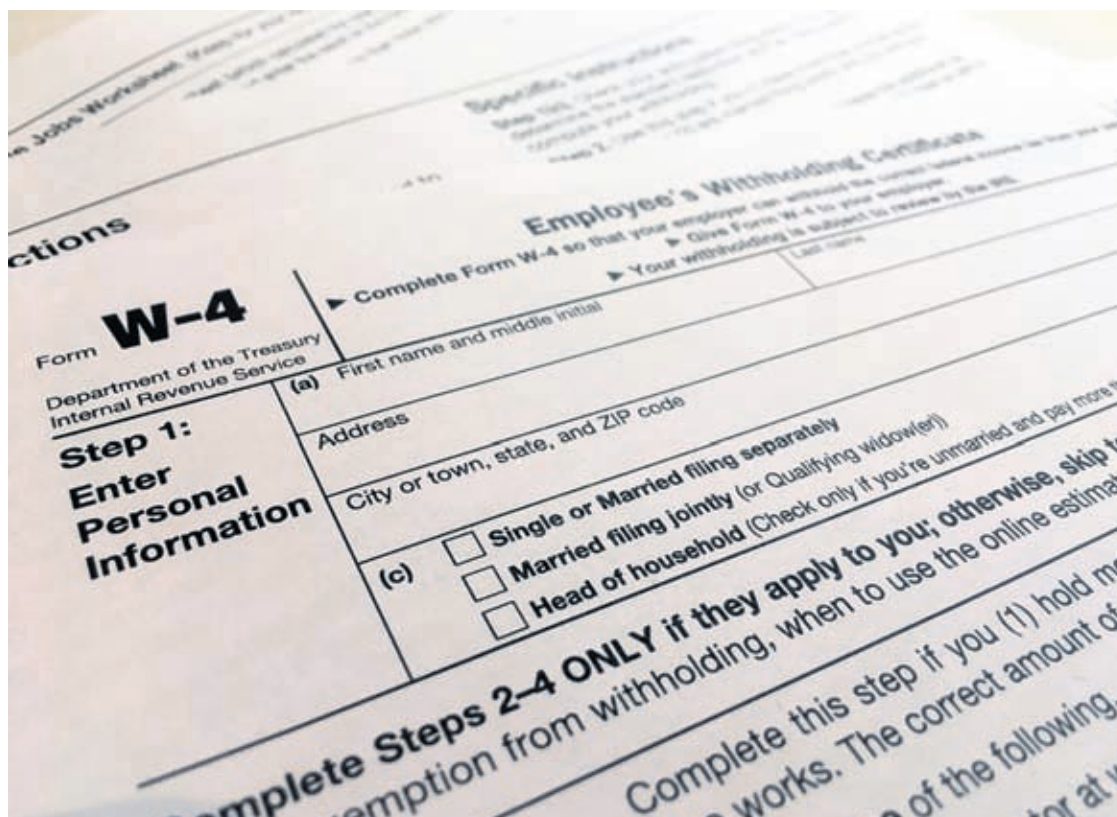
By **SARAH SKIDMORE SELL**
AP Business Writer

Americans will be getting extra time to prepare their taxes. The Internal Revenue Service says it's delaying the traditional tax filing deadline from April 15 until May 17.

The IRS announced the decision Wednesday and said it would provide further guidance in the coming days. The move provides more breathing room for taxpayers and the IRS alike to cope with changes brought on by the pandemic.

"The IRS wants to continue to do everything possible to help taxpayers navigate the unusual circumstances related to the pandemic, while also working on important tax administration responsibilities," IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig said in a statement.

The decision postpones when individual taxpayers must file their return and when their payment is due. The IRS said taxpayers who owe money would not face any further penalties or interest if they pay by May 17. The new deadline also applies to individuals who pay self-employment tax.



In this Feb. 5, 2020, file photo, a W-4 form is viewed in New York.

Taxpayers do not need to take any action to take advantage of the new deadline. Those who need more time beyond May 17 can request an extension until October 15.

The new deadline does not apply to estimated tax payments that are due on April 15; those remain due by that day.

The decision to extend the deadline comes after an

intense year for the chronically underfunded IRS. The pandemic hit in the middle of last year's tax filing season, setting the agency back in terms of processing. The IRS has also been a key player in doling out government relief payments, and is currently helping to send out the third round of payments in the middle of the current tax filing season.

Additionally, the extension

gives the IRS time to issue guidance on recent tax law changes. The American Rescue Plan excludes the first \$10,200 of unemployment benefits from federal taxes for those making less than \$150,000.

"Never before has the law changed so substantially in the middle of tax filing season," Patrick Thomas, director of Notre Dame Law School's Tax Clinic, said in a

statement.

The IRS must issue guidance for taxpayers and tax preparers alike as millions of returns already filed likely do not account for this change.

A number of lawmakers and professionals from the tax community have urged the tax filing season be extended to accommodate for these pressures. The House Ways and Means Committee applauded the move.

"This extension is absolutely necessary to give Americans some needed flexibility in a time of unprecedented crisis," said Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass. and Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-N.J., chairman of the panel's oversight subcommittee.

Rettig is expected to speak to the committee tomorrow about how the IRS is managing this filing season and the need for this extension.

The IRS continues to urge people to file as soon as possible, particularly those who are owed refunds. In some cases filing will help taxpayers more quickly get any remaining relief payments they are entitled to. □

Associated Press

Prepare the popcorn: AMC opening more movie theaters

By **MICHELLE CHAPMAN**
AP Business Writer

It's showtime! AMC Theatres says it will have 98% of its U.S. movie theaters open on Friday as a bunch of theaters reopen in California. Even more theaters are expected to open by March 26.

AMC said that more than 40 of its locations in California are reopening beginning on Friday. California is expected to open 52 of its 54 locations by Monday. The Leewood, Kansas-based company is preparing to resume operations at the rest of its California locations once the proper local approvals are in place. AMC previously opened more than 500 of its theaters elsewhere around the country.

Movie theaters all over

shuttered their doors a year ago as the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe. While some movie theaters have opened over the past few months with limited capacity and enhanced safety protocols, the announcement by AMC — the nation's largest movie chain — to open nearly all of its U.S. theaters by month's end means more people will have more locations to choose from if they want to see a film on the big screen.

AMC's announcement is welcomed by movie fans not only because more of them will get to return to AMC's reclining seats and stadium style format, but because it means the company has hopefully put the worst behind

it. It was only in June that AMC cautioned it may not survive the coronavirus pandemic, as its theaters closed and film studios started releasing more movies directly to viewers on streaming services.

But AMC stayed the course, slowly opening its theaters in states over the past several months when it was allowed to and pivoting its business. One of its outside-the-box moves included renting out theaters for private movie screenings to a limited number of people.

Shares of AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc. rose more than 3% to \$14.03 in afternoon trading on Thursday. In the year to date the stock is up over 500%.

More theaters opening



A pedestrian walks by the newly reopened AMC 34th Street theater on March 5, 2021, in New York.

Associated Press

will also mean more jobs for people to go to. AMC spokesman Ryan Noonan says the company is welcoming back employees who were working for it prior to theaters being shut down, as well as bringing in new workers. All will be trained on its cleaning and

safety protocols, which include social distancing and automatic seat blocking in each theater, mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitizing stations, upgraded air filtration, contactless ticketing and mobile ordering for food and drinks. □

No cigar: Interstellar object is cookie-shaped planet shard

By **MARCIA DUNN**

AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla.

(AP) — Our solar system's first known interstellar visitor is neither a comet nor asteroid as first suspected and looks nothing like a cigar. A new study says the mystery object is likely a remnant of a Pluto-like world and shaped like a cookie.

Arizona State University astronomers reported this week that the strange 148-foot (45-meter) object that appears to be made of frozen nitrogen, just like the surface of Pluto and Neptune's largest moon Triton. The study's authors, Alan Jackson and Steven Desch, think an impact knocked a chunk off an icy nitrogen-covered planet 500 million years ago and sent the piece tumbling out of its own star system, toward ours. The reddish remnant is believed to be a sliver of its original self, its outer layers evaporated by cosmic radiation and, more recently, the sun.

It's named Oumuamua, Hawaiian for scout, in honor of the observatory in Hawaii that discovered it in 2017.

Visible only as a pinpoint of light millions of miles away at its closest approach, it was determined to have originated beyond our solar system because its speed and path suggested it wasn't orbiting the sun or anything else.



This 2018 illustration provided by William Hartmann and Michael Belton shows a depiction of the Oumuamua interstellar object as a pancake-shaped disk.

Associated Press

The only other object confirmed to have strayed from another star system into our own is the comet 21/Borisov, discovered in 2019.

But what is Oumuamua? It didn't fit into known categories — it looked like an asteroid but sped along like a comet. Unlike a comet, though, it didn't have a visible tail. Speculation flipped back and forth between comet and asteroid — and it was even suggested it could be an alien artifact.

"Everybody is interested

in aliens, and it was inevitable that this first object outside the solar system would make people think of aliens," Desch said in a statement. "But it's important in science not to jump to conclusions."

Using its shininess, size and shape — and that it was

propelled by escaping substances that didn't produce a visible tail — Jackson and Desch devised computer models that helped them determine Oumuamua was most likely a chunk of nitrogen ice being gradually eroded, the way a bar of soap thins

with use.

Their two papers were published Tuesday by the American Geophysical Union and also presented at the Lunar and Planetary Sciences Conference, typically held in Houston but virtual this year.

Not all scientists buy the new explanation. Harvard University's Avi Loeb disputes the findings and stands by his premise that the object appears to be more artificial than natural — in other words, something from an alien civilization, perhaps a light sail. His newly published book "Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth," addresses the subject.

Given that Oumuamua is unlike comets and asteroids — and something not seen before — "we cannot assume 'business as usual,' as many scientists argue," Loeb wrote in an email Wednesday. "If we contemplate 'something that we had not seen before,' we must leave the artificial origin hypothesis on the table and collect more evidence on objects from the same class." □

Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

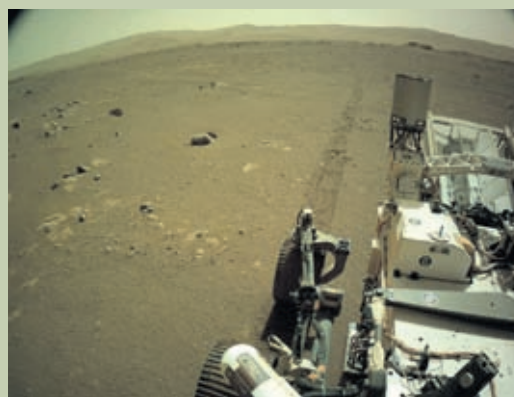
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Difficulty Level ★★★★★

3/19

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Mars rover sends back grinding, squealing sounds of driving



This Mar. 7, 2021 photo provided by NASA shows tire tracks left by the Mars Perseverance rover.

Associated Press

By **MARCIA DUNN**

AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA's newest Mars rover has sent back the first-ever sounds of driving on the red planet — a grinding, clanking, banging affair that by Earth standards would be pretty worrisome.

The noises made by Perseverance's six

metal wheels and suspension on the first test drive two weeks ago are part of a 16-minute raw audio feed released Wednesday by Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

"If I heard these sounds driving my car, I'd pull over and call for a tow," Dave Gruel, an engineer on the rover team, said in a written NASA statement. "But if you take a minute to consider what you're hearing and where it was recorded, it makes perfect sense."

Perseverance — the biggest, most advanced rover ever sent to Mars — landed near an ancient river delta on Feb. 18 to search for signs of past life. Samples will be taken from the most promising rocks for eventual return to Earth.

The rover carries two microphones. One already has captured the sounds of wind and rock-zapping lasers, the other was meant to record the descent and landing. This second mike didn't pick up any sounds of the rover's arrival at Mars, but managed to record the first test drive March 4. □

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Ringo calling! If he wants you to sing, who could say no?

By MARCELA ISAZA
AP Entertainment Writer
LOS ANGELES (AP) — If Ringo Starr calls to ask if you'll sing on a song for him, who could possibly say no? The beloved Beatle dug into his contacts for help on the chorus of "Here's to the Nights," his most recent song written by Diane Warren, and he recruited quite a choir. Paul McCartney. Sheryl Crow. Dave Grohl. Lenny Kravitz. Joe Walsh. Ben Harper. Finneas. Chris Stapleton. Yola. Jenny Lewis. Corinne Bailey Rae. Eric Burton (of the Black Pumas). Steve Lukather. "Here's to the nights we won't remember, with the friends we won't forget," they all sing. It's a perfect sentiment for the 80-year-old drummer who, as McCartney once sang "has memories longer than the road that stretches out ahead." "Everyone was really kind to me to do what they did," Starr told The Associated Press recently. Two people did say no, actually. Ringo won't reveal who, but they must have been REALLY busy.



Ringo Starr gestures as he presents the award for record of the year at the 63rd annual Grammy Awards at the Los Angeles Convention Center on Sunday, March 14, 2021.

Associated Press

Starr's EP of five new songs comes out Friday. The project gave him something to do during COVID-19 lockdown in his Los Angeles home. He said he divided much of his time between making music, painting and working out. "Last year I left the house no more than seven times, and I think I'm exaggerating," he said. "I'm a prime

target for this COVID. Now I've had my shots. I feel groovy and there's nowhere to go!" One place was Sunday's Grammy Awards, where he presented the record of the year honor to Billie Eilish, who — let's do the math here — was born 31 years after the Beatles broke up. Even a Beatle gets the blues, and Starr said he felt

it during the long layoff. He had to cancel gigs with his All-Starr Band last year and, most recently, postponed hopeful plans to go back on the road in May and June, and again in the fall. He'll wait until next year, at least. "I was really sad in the beginning because I couldn't go on the road," he said. "I love to play. I love the audi-

ence. They love me. I'll go anywhere to be loved!" He chuckled at that remark. It's one of the things he has in common with his other surviving Beatles mate. They both stay very active musically, love to perform and, with vegetarian diets, are both in the type of shape that others their age would envy. For Starr, his vehicle the last three decades has been the All-Starr Band, a simple concept that continually regenerates. He invites a rotating crew of veteran musicians, the main requirement being they must have been part of some hit songs, in order to keep the set list varied and fresh. He said he was so insecure the first time he brought along two fellow drummers: Levon Helm and Jim Keltner. It turned out to be great fun for Starr, who loves being in a band, as is obvious from his beaming face when he sits behind a drum kit. "Every time I'd finish an All-Starr tour, I'd come home and tell Barbara, 'that's it, I've done it, I've had enough,'" he said. "She'd say, 'certainly, darling.' Weeks later, I'd be saying I've got to get on the road. I've got to call people. That's just who I am." He's also promoting a limited-edition book, "Ringo Rocks: 30 Years of the All-Stars."

It's not a bad track record for a sickly boy who grew up in a rough section of Liverpool, an only child who joined a band that gave him three brothers for life. "It was a super-incredible connection of peace and love," Starr said. "It was so great. I still miss John and George, but that's how life is. Paul and I are still great friends and we support each other." □



Author John Grisham attends the opening night of "A Time To Kill" on Broadway in New York on Oct. 20, 2013, left, and author Margaret Atwood attends the Glamour Women of the Year Awards in New York on Nov. 11, 2019.

Associated Press

By HILLEL ITALIE
AP National Writer
NEW YORK (AP) — One of the first novels about the pandemic will be a collaborative effort, with Margaret Atwood, John Grisham and Celeste Ng among the writers. The Authors Guild Foundation announced Thurs-

day that it had reached a deal with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books & Media to publish "Fourteen Days: An Unauthorized Gathering." The story is set on a Manhattan rooftop in 2020 as the virus spreads worldwide and the rich are fleeing the city. Novelist and Authors Guild

Atwood, Grisham among contributors to pandemic novel

President Douglas Preston came up with the idea as a way to raise money for the foundation. "At the Guild, we realized that we had an opportunity in these dark times to do something positive and even transformative through the creation of this unusual literary work. Human beings have always confronted tragedy by telling stories, and this book would be our answer to COVID-19," Preston said. "Hunger Games" author Suzanne Collins made a "major" donation to the Guild foundation to support the project. Atwood is editing "Fourteen Days" and helped recruit a wide range of contribu-

tors, including Dave Eggers, Ishmael Reed, Monique Truong, Hampton Sides, Mary Pope Osborne and Emma Donoghue. "Fourteen Days" is tentatively scheduled for the spring of 2022. "The cast of lively fictional characters on the Manhattan rooftop in 'Fourteen Days' have much to say to one another about life during the pandemic and even more about life in general, sometimes getting into discussions, debates or outright quarrels — and sometimes finding resolution in unexpected moments of empathy and connection," Atwood said in a statement. □

1	2	3	9	7	8	6	5	4
5	8	6	4	1	2	7	9	3
4	7	9	3	5	6	8	1	2
3	4	8	5	6	7	9	2	1
7	9	2	8	4	1	5	3	6
6	5	1	2	9	3	4	8	7
9	6	7	1	2	5	3	4	8
2	3	4	6	8	9	1	7	5
8	1	5	7	3	4	2	6	9



In this Thursday, Oct. 8, 2020 file photo, World Athletics President Sebastian Coe wearing a face mask inspects at the National Stadium, the main stadium of Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, in Tokyo.

Associated Press

Russians to compete as neutral athletes again in track

MONACO (AP) — Russian athletes in track and field will be allowed to compete internationally again under a neutral flag as their national federation edges closer to having its longstanding doping suspension lifted. The World Athletics council voted to revive the “authorized neutral athlete” scheme, which can grant individual exemptions from the suspension after vetting the athlete’s drug-testing record. As before, there will be a cap of 10 for the Olympics.

“We will start that process. It’s arduous work. The doping review panel work long hours to do this, they’ve done it successfully in the past and the process is under way,” World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said.

That paves the way for athletes like three-time high jump world champion Mariya Lasitskene and former hurdles world champion Sergei Shubenkov to return to the Diamond League circuit ahead of the Tokyo Olympics.

Thursday’s decision comes after World Athletics approved RusAF’s road map for anti-doping reforms. It includes more drug testing for athletes and encourages whistleblowers to share what they know about drug use.

The plan also contains an admission of “an extensive doping and covering-up culture involving athletes, coaches and officials” which arose “from inheriting a post-Soviet doping culture aimed at winning by all means including doping.”

“The judgment we made about ANAs was contingent on the quality of that plan,” Coe said. “The task force has given confidence to the council that that reinstatement plan is substantive and will take us in the right direction. And so the decision today to move ahead, to re-implement the ANA status is a good one and we will try and do that as quickly and as sensibly but as carefully as we can.”

A different neutral athlete system will apply for the Olympics, where the International Olympic Committee sets the rules. All Russian athletes at the Tokyo Games will compete for “ROC,” or Russian Olympic Committee. That comes after the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled against Russia in December in a separate case about falsified data from the Moscow anti-doping laboratory. The Russian track federation, known as RusAF, has been suspended since 2015 after investigations revealed doping was rife among elite Russian athletes. □



Matt Jones of Australia hits from the 18th tee during the first round of the Honda Classic golf tournament, Thursday, March 18, 2021, in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Associated Press

Jones ties course record with a 61 in Honda opening round

By **TIM REYNOLDS**

AP Sports Writer

PALM BEACH GARDENS, Fla.

(AP) — Matt Jones’ opening round at the Honda Classic was remarkable.

He was remarkably unimpressed. Jones tied the course record at PGA National with a bogey-free 9-under 61 on Thursday, giving him a three-shot lead after the morning wave of players. He matched the mark set by Brian Harman in the second round of the 2012 Honda, and was one shot better than the final-round 62 that Tiger Woods posted that same year.

All told, there have been roughly 6,000 tournament rounds at the Honda since it moved to PGA National in 2007. None was better than the one Thursday from Jones, an Australian ranked No. 83 in the world.

“I play golf for a living,” Jones said. “I mean, I should be able to shoot a good golf score occasionally. It doesn’t happen as much as I want. But yes, I’m very happy with it. I was very calm, I was very relaxed out there. I’m normally a bit more amped-up and hyped-up and I had a different goal this week, to be a little more calm than normally and walk slower.” It worked wonders.

He’s not into charting superlatives. He doesn’t know how many course records

he now holds, or how many holes in one he’s made. He wasn’t even aware he had four consecutive birdies on the front nine Thursday until he saw his card on a giant leaderboard as his round was ending. “I was just managing the golf course and hitting good shots,” Jones said. Russell Henley and Aaron Wise were each 6 under after their opening rounds, those 64s matching the best score at the Honda by anyone — Jones excluded — since Rory McIlroy and Russell Knox each had 63s in 2014. Nobody in the field last year shot better than a 66. And Henley and Wise still walked off the course Thursday three shots back. “That’s an amazing round,” Wise said. “But I felt like I played one, too.”

Jones had the four consecutive birdies on holes 2-5, had others on the par-4 11th and par-4 13th, then finished with birdies on each of his final three holes and never dropped a shot despite the Honda’s usual windy conditions.

Adam Hadwin, who played in Jones’ group, said “good shot” more times than he could count.

“I just stopped saying it at a certain point,” Hadwin said. “He just hit so many, you just stop saying it. You’re just under the assumption that it was good.”

Jones has just one PGA Tour

victory, that coming with a chip-in to win a playoff at the 2014 Houston Open. He hasn’t made the cut in a major since the 2016 British Open and has never finished better than tied for fourth at the Honda, doing that in his debut at the event in 2008.

It was still a befuddling day for many. Graeme McDowell played the “Bear Trap” stretch — the par-3 15th, par-4 16th and par-3 17th — in 6 over, after making a quadruple-bogey at 15 and a double-bogey on 17. And Hunter Mahan had a six-hole stretch in which he made, in order, eagle, bogey, bogey, triple-bogey, bogey, birdie.

DIVOTS: Among other notables in the field, Zach Johnson was in a group six shots back after shooting 67 and Phil Mickelson shot a 1-over 71. ... Erik Compton, a South Florida native and two-time heart transplant recipient, finished at even par. Compton was a Monday qualifier this week. ... This is the 15th time the Honda is being played at PGA National. No first-round leader on this course has won the tournament; the last first-round leader to win the Honda was Justin Leonard in 2003 at Mirasol. ... The previous best first-round score at the Honda was 62 by Tim Herron in 1996, at Eagle Trace. □

Harvick reflects on anniversary of emotional Atlanta victory

By JENNA FRYER

AP Auto Racing Writer
CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) —

The first three weeks following Dale Earnhardt's death were a whirlwind for Kevin Harvick, the driver suddenly tasked with carrying a race team reeling from grief. Harvick was slated to race for the 2001 championship in NASCAR's second-tier series but Richard Childress needed him to fill Earnhardt's seat. Harvick, admittedly "young and dumb" at the time, told Childress he'd do both jobs. Attempting to replace Earnhardt was an unenviable ask of any driver, let alone a 25-year-old at the start of his NASCAR career. By committing to that frantic two-series schedule, Harvick created a shield from the intense scrutiny of an emotionally draining season.

His Cup Series debut came seven days after Earnhardt's death and then Harvick was off to Las Vegas for his wedding — it had been built into the NASCAR schedule before the season began — and the start of a year spent primarily in race cars and airplanes. The standout moment of that tumultuous season came in his third Cup race when Harvick held off Jeff Gordon by 0.006-seconds — the edge of his front



In this March 11, 2001, file photo, Kevin Harvick holds up the trophy in Victory Lane after winning the NASCAR Cracker Barrel 500 auto race at Atlanta Motor Speedway in Hampton, Ga.

Associated Press

bumper — to win at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Harvick returns to Atlanta on Sunday for the 20th anniversary of that victory. He says he wishes he "would have realized then how big this moment was."

His memories of that emotional win two decades later are scattered. He

recalls the five-car battle over the final 10 laps, the fans lining the fence along the back straightaway and the backward victory lap when he flashed three fingers out his window to honor Earnhardt. The rest is a bit of a blur. "It was obviously a moment I don't think any of us expected,

but there are a number of things that obviously changed in the weeks before that," Harvick said. "It took me a long time to really get comfortable, to really even think about things that happened that day. There were so many things that happened backwards in my career."

Harvick won two Cup races that year and beat Kurt Busch for top rookie honors. He won another five times in the Xfinity Series (then called the Busch Series) and the championship. All told, he made 69 starts and crisscrossed the country, often borrowing planes from Childress or teammate Mike Skinner, to get between tracks when the two series raced at different venues.

"Racing that much really hid me from a lot of things because of the fact I was so busy. It really allowed me to kind of hide under a rock," Harvick said. "But 2002 was when I realized the magnitude of the situation we were in. Racing so much and often in 2001 really covered all that stuff up." Harvick spent 13 years driving for Richard Childress Racing and recognizes now how critical that 2001 season was. It was imperative that the organization keep Earnhardt's car on track all season and the At-

lanta victory was a morale boost for a heartbroken crew. "Knowing now what it meant to the sport, and just that moment in general of being able to carry on, was so important," Harvick said. He moved to Stewart-Haas Racing in 2014, the year he won his only Cup championship, but he's been a perennial contender every season. He won a series-high nine races last year but failed to advance to the championship finale. Five races into this new season, Harvick heads into the anniversary of his first Cup victory looking for some of that success from last year. He's led only 17 laps so far this season, a far cry from the 318 laps he'd led through five races a year ago. He does sit seventh in the standings with four top-10 finishes. But the rest of the SHR stable is 20th or lower in points and the organization doesn't seem to have the same pace it did in 2020. SHR is adapting to NASCAR's inspection crackdown on the shape of the rear wheel wells, an area SHR had apparently achieved significant gains by taking advantage of loopholes. Harvick crew chief Rodney Childers told SiriusXM NASCAR Radio the inspection changes cost the team 70 counts of downforce. □

Alabama House approves bill to ban transgender athletes



Stephanie Marty demonstrates against a proposed ban on transgender girls and women from female sports leagues outside the South Dakota governor's mansion in Pierre, S.D. on Thursday March 11, 2021.

Associated Press

By KIM CHANDLER
Associated Press
MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama could be-

come the next conservative state to prevent transgender girls from playing on female sports teams as

the state House of Representatives on Thursday approved the legislation. Representatives voted 74-19 for the bill that will require K-12 athletes to play on teams based on the biological sex listed on their birth certificates. The approval came after Republicans voted to end a filibuster. The bill now moves to the Alabama Senate. More than a dozen states are considering restrictions on transgender athletes or gender-confirming health care for transgender minors. Mississippi Republican Gov. Tate Reeves last week signed a bill to ban transgender athletes from competing on girls

or women's sports teams. However, South Carolina lawmakers this week rejected a similar bill. "It is unfair for biological males to compete against females in high school sports," Republican Rep. Scott Stadhagen of Hartselle said as debate opened on the bill. Alabama legislators who pushed the bill gave no evidence of any transgender athletes competing in state schools or universities. Democratic legislators questioned the need for the bill, saying the decision should be left to athletic associations and lawmakers shouldn't get involved. Democratic Rep. Napo-

leon Bracy of Prichard asked "what happened" to make the legislation a priority in the Alabama Legislature, noting that lawmakers could not point to instances in the state of transgender athletes dominating sports. "As a body, we are trying to practice medicine without a degree," Moore said. Supporters of the bills say transgender girls are born bigger and faster and have an unfair advantage in competition. Opponents say the bills are rooted in discrimination and fear and violate the federal law barring sex discrimination in education. □